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161434Z Dec 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 006994

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: DEHAP PREPARING NEW KURDISH PARTY

Classified By: Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Leaders of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Peoples' Party (DEHAP) are forming a new party they claim will be more broadly based and less focused on the Kurdish issue. DEHAP officials hope the new party, unlike DEHAP, will be able to draw enough support to enter Parliament. They claim the leadership of the new party will be openly elected, though they have not worked out the election details. DEHAP officials say they are forming the new party in part because they expect a high court to close DEHAP, which faces separatism charges, but also as part of an effort to reverse ground lost to the ruling AK Party in the last local elections. The press has touted former MP Leyla Zana as a likely party president, but her ongoing trial may make her ineligible to run, and our contacts say there are more qualified candidates. A Kurdish attorney and human rights activist predicted to us that the new party will be the same old DEHAP with a different name. End Summary.

New, More Broadly Based Party Planned

12. (U) Tuncer Bakirhan, DEHAP president, told us the DEHAP leadership is in the process of establishing a new party, tentatively called the Democratic Society Movement (DSM). The goal is to have the party legally established by April, and then to phase out DEHAP. Bakirhan said DEHAP leaders want to develop a party with a broader base. The new party will be liberal, but less ideologically leftist than DEHAP, he asserted. It will have a broad platform, less focused on the Kurdish issue than its predecessor. Bakirhan appeared uneasy when we asked how DSM will approach religion. He averred that the Kurdish population is "Muslim but secular," and said the new party will "not be against religion" (Note: The DEHAP leadership is leftist and non-religious, but the party draws most of its support from the generally pious southeastern Kurds. End Note). DEHAP leaders are hoping the new party will draw more votes from outside the Kurdish-dominated southeast, and thus garner the 10 percent share of the national vote required to enter Parliament.

13. (U) Bakirhan claimed that DSM will be the first Turkish party with "internal democracy." The party leadership will be elected through an open, transparent process. When pressed, he was vague on the details, saying that "everyone" will be allowed to vote, regardless of whether they are members of DEHAP. However, Nazmi Gur, DEHAP vice chairman for foreign affairs, gave us a somewhat different outlook. He said DEHAP will organize caucuses across the country, in which selected delegates will elect DSM leaders. When we told him about Bakirhan's description of a more open process, Gur replied that the details have not yet been worked out.

Human Rights Attorney: New Party Will Be Same As Old

14. (C) Yusuf Alatas, chairman of the Human Rights Association, told us he doubts the new party will be different from the old. A Kurdish attorney who is close to DEHAP, Alatas has often criticized the party for a lack of vision and a failure to allow new leadership to emerge. The new party "will be led by the same old people, who don't get along with each other and can't make decisions democratically," he said. "How could it be different?" Alatas said DEHAP members, as a rule, slavishly follow their preferred leaders. Any DSM election will be a popularity contest among established DEHAP figures. At the same time, he said, there is a need for a party focused on the Kurdish issue. DEHAP or its successors will remain a permanent fixture in Turkish politics as long as the other parties continue to neglect Kurdish language/cultural rights.

Zana Touted As Potential Leader

15. (C) Leyla Zana, a leftist Kurdish former MP with close

ties to the PKK, has made public statements about the new party. Much of the press has touted Zana, recently released from prison pending the outcome of her trial on charges of being a PKK member, as a likely party president. But it is unclear whether Zana and her co-defendants can legally participate in party politics while their trial is ongoing; Alatas, Zana's attorney, told us there are different possible legal interpretations. Moreover, our contacts averred that Zana is only one among many possible leaders. Bakirhan acknowledged that Zana, who in October traveled to Brussels to receive the European Parliament's Sakharov prize, has become a media celebrity and symbol for the Kurdish cause, especially in Western Europe, which has lionized her. But he claimed Zana's international star status will not affect voters. Gur called Zana "uneducated" and predicted voters would elect a candidate with more stature to serve as party president, though he declined to name other contenders. Alatas said Zana would be a disaster as president. Turkey's Kurds need independent political leadership, not someone like Zana, who "takes orders from (jailed PKK leader) Abdullah Ocalan," he said. Alatas said he was disgusted by the base "populism" of Zana's public speeches after her release from prison, and has limited contact with Zana and her co-defendants to the minimum needed to continue to represent them in court.

DEHAP Faces Possible Closure

16. (U) DEHAP faces charges of separatism in an ongoing legal case that could result in the party's closure; several of DEHAP's predecessor parties were closed by the State in the past. Gur said DEHAP leaders expect the High Court of Appeals to close the party, and are establishing DSM in part as a vehicle to continue their political activities.

DEHAP Hoping to Regain Lost Ground

17. (U) During an October trip to the southeast, we met with AK Party mayors who defeated DEHAP incumbents in Van, Bitlis, and Mus, reflecting broader AKP gains in the DEHAP stronghold in the March local elections. The mayors averred to us that voters recognized that DEHAP has failed to deliver on its promises, and that AKP, as the ruling party, can do better. Moreover, they said the AKP government has adopted some reforms demanded by Kurds, such as those allowing, under tight restrictions, Kurdish language courses and Kurdish-language news broadcasts. The mayors predicted that AKP would gradually earn the trust of southeastern Kurds and eclipse DEHAP in the region. Bakirhan rejected this claim, insisting the March elections were a temporary setback for DEHAP. He said DEHAP garnered more votes than in the previous local elections, but lost ground because the other parties united against DEHAP in coalitions. Moreover, he said, AKP used its status as the sole ruling party to maximum advantage. Bakirhan claimed people in the region are already beginning to realize that AKP has no intention of following through on its campaign promises. Later, however, Bakirhan contradicted himself, citing the disappointing results of the March elections as a reason for creating a new, more broadly based party.

Comment

18. (C) DEHAP, like its predecessors, has not been a positive force for resolving Turkey's Kurdish problem. The party is too leftist, and too closely associated with the PKK, to draw the nationwide support needed to bring Kurdish issues to the public agenda. A fresh approach is sorely needed. Unfortunately, however, we have no reason to believe the new party will be anything more than yet another new label on the same old package. It is difficult to take DEHAP leaders seriously in their claims to desire a more democratic party when they have obviously put so little thought into how to bring that about. Earlier this month, a statement signed by prominent Kurds in Turkey and Europe, including many DEHAP leaders, was published in the International Herald Tribune and Le Monde. After the publication, Zana and others who signed the document engaged in a bitter round of fingerpointing, with some signatories accusing others of having radicalized the draft without their knowledge. This does not bode well for Kurdish political movement.